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SUBJECT: ANOTHER ANC DEFECTION TO COPE IN KWAZULU NATAL

REF: DURBAN 9

11. (SBU) Summary: Another senior African National Congress member in KwaZulu Natal announced his defection to the Congress of the People. Siyanda Mhlongo -- until yesterday the head of policy for the ANC in KwaZulu Natal and former Mayor of KwaDukuza -- announced his resignation from the ANC, citing "high levels of corruption" and "moral decay" in the party as his main motivation. The move was not surprising: Mhlongo is a known Thabo Mbeki supporter and has been an outspoken critic of current ANC leadership. End summary.

Announcement at Packed News Conference

12. (U) Mr. Siyanda Mhlongo, head of policy for the ANC in KZN, announced his resignation from the ANC and move to COPE at a well-attended press conference in Durban on January 22, 2009. Mhlongo cited "high levels of corruption" and "moral decay" in the ANC as the main reasons for his decision, but noted that the ANC's determination to help Jacob Zuma "dodge his day in court" also was a factor. Mhlongo said that Zuma must "answer many questions" either in court or in public.

13. (U) Mhlongo told the press conference, "there is no permanent marriage in politics and sentiments are secondary to principles." He said that he "had a conversation with his moral conscience" and decided that he could no longer identify with the ANC. Mhlongo added that he was targeted by senior leaders of the ANC in KZN because he spoke out against corruption. As a result, he was persecuted by the ANC, through disciplinary actions and a brief expulsion from the party, he alleged.

14. (U) Mhlongo also revealed that the ANC this week recalled Sduduzo Gumede, the Mayor of his hometown, KwaDukuza--because the ANC suspected Gumede of being a member of COPE. Mhlongo defended the mayor, saying he was hard-working and a "corruption-buster" in a municipality that suffered from mismanagement and financial irregularities under its previous municipal manager. He claimed that the mayor's sacking was further evidence of ANC resolve to "purge all those who are fighting corruption" and who supported Mbeki at the Polokwane ANC conference.

15. (U) Mlungisi Hlongwane, COPE's National Head of Elections, and Lucky Gabela, Provincial Chairperson of COPE in KZN (Reftel) welcomed Mhlongo's defection to COPE. Mr. Gabela announced that Mr. Mhlongo will be the new spokesperson for COPE in KZN.

ANC Unconcerned

16. (SBU) ANC Provincial Spokesperson Nomfundo Mcetshwa told Pol-Econ Assistant that the ANC is not surprised by Mhlongo's resignation and his departure is not a cause for concern. The party had suspected him of working underground on behalf of

COPE, she explained. She also revealed that Mhlongo was expected to face a disciplinary hearing January 23, 2009 for "absconding from work" for several months without a valid reason.

17. (SBU) Comment. Despite the ANC's posture, Mhlongo's resignation from the ANC to join COPE was an embarrassment, given that KZN province is considered the most united behind Zuma. Although Mr. Mhlongo was an outspoken and experienced member of the ANC, he was disliked by many ANC members because of his support for Mbeki at Polokwane (his local branch of the ANC was the only one in KZN to support Mbeki over Zuma) and his continued public criticism of ANC leadership for not addressing corruption. For these reasons, and as the ANC noted, his defection comes as no great surprise. It will be interesting to see whether he will be able to bring other senior members of ANC in the province over to COPE's side.

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